



Patti Smith : An Unauthorized Biography

By Victor Bockris

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"Patti Smith" came to New York at the age of nineteen, determined to become someone. And she did -- with a vengeance. Patti's intensely dramatic style, her sensuality, and her outrageous acts set her apart from other performers of the 1970s. She was an astonishingly bold and powerful artist. In "Patti Smith," Victor Bockris, the much-respected biographer of Lou Reed and Keith Richards, and Roberta Bayley present the first full-length biography of one of the most revered female rock artists of all time -- as well as a fascinating portrait of the frenzied New York scene in which she rocketed to fame. From her roots in New Jersey to her reemergence after the death of her husband in the 1990s, this remarkable biography documents Patti Smith's life within the larger context of the ebullient artistic climate of the 1970s and examines her influence on the generation of women artists who followed. Bockris and Bayley explore Patti's complicated and intriguing relationships with Robert Mapplethorpe and Sam Shepard and her friendships with Bob Dylan, John Cale, Lou Reed, and many other avant-garde musicians and artists, placing her at the heart of the New York art scene. But as quickly as she rose to acclaim, she did the unexpected: She dropped out of sight and moved to Detroit to marry and raise a family. Filled with little-known stories and anecdotes about some of rock's most famous names, Bockris and Bayley's stunning profile of this cultural icon confirms what Ingrid Sischy wrote in an article in "Interview" magazine: "[Smith] gives us something that music and words are supposed to but, in fact, rarely deliver: the power to transport ourselves."

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

If anyone in rock & roll has lived a life that divides neatly into chapters, it's godmother of punk Patti Smith. In her own words, a "gawky and homely... real nervous and sickly" little girl, she nevertheless grew up with a commanding sense of destiny. A bout with scarlet fever when she was 7 years old brought on hallucinations, which fired her already varicolored imagination. Raised a Jehovah's Witness, she broke with the faith in part because it didn't accommodate an aesthetic that embraced everyone from John Coltrane to Maria Callas, from Louisa May Alcott to Jean-Paul Sartre. Venturing to New York, she found acceptance first as a poet and then as a rock singer, drawing upon rock icons (Bob Dylan, Brian Jones, and Jim Morrison among them) to create a riveting unisexual persona all her own.

From there, we witness Smith's inevitable rise and fall (in her case it's literal--she was nearly killed when she tumbled offstage during a 1977 performance). Victor Bockris and Roberta Bayley do an admirable job of tying the disparate phases of Smith's life into a cohesive whole, contrasting the '70s punk priestess in full flower with the curiously subservient suburban Detroit housewife she became following her 1980 marriage to hard-drinking former MC5 guitarist Fred "Sonic" Smith and the middle-aged survivor who returned to the studio and stage in the 1990s. Smith kept company with some of the pillars of late-20th-century pop culture--Robert Mapplethorpe was her roommate, Sam Shepard was her lover, and William Burroughs was one of her many champions. But what's most striking is how she's been able to simultaneously borrow and build upon the work of the artists in her universe, growing in stature while elevating all that stirred her passion. --*Steven Stolder*

From Publishers Weekly

Sometimes called the godmother of punk, Patti Smith is one of rock 'n' roll's great stories of self-creation. Growing up as an androgynous misfit in Philadelphia and New Jersey, Smith developed a hero-worshipping fascination with the "genius lifestyles" of famous artists from Arthur Rimbaud to Mick Jagger. In the gritty ferment of 1970s New York, she turned her hero-worship into genuine artistic innovation, inventing a provocative and influential amalgam of incantatory poetry, performance art and rock, radically redefining roles open to women in the male-dominated rock scene. Bockris (Transformer: The Lou Reed Story) and Bayley's detailed, uneven biography decks Smith's life story with anecdotes and comments from both the famous and the lesser known among her many colorful acquaintances. William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and her quondam lover, Robert Mapplethorpe, turn up, as does Bockris's own 1972 interview with Smith (her first). In fact, Bockris seems to have taken this interview as the final word on her character and potential. It can be hard to get a clear picture of later developments in Smith's life: her constant concern with her image, her years as a housewife in Detroit after marrying ex-MC5 guitarist Fred "Sonic" Smith and her return to rock prominence following his death in 1994. The biography scrupulously cites negative as well as favorable reviews and comments on Smith and her work, covering (for example) the 1978 controversy over her use of the word "nigger." Like most writers on punk and performance poetry, Bockris and Bayley seem to prefer the young tough of Patti Smith in the 1970s. While informative and intelligent, this will hardly stand as the definitive account of one of rock's grande dames. (Sept.)

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From Library Journal

Patti Smith's voice has always been too big for paper. High on Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Revere, and her Bad Self, she formed a garage band to record and perform her body electric. Bockris, rock biographer and New York scenester supreme, succeeds because he reveals the woman, mother, and widow behind the "punk"

bravado. In the early 1990s, riot grrrls deemed Patti a "shero," but Bockris shows that she struggled with emotional and sexual insecurity especially when that other Bowery Babe, Debbie Harry, formed Blondie. How Patti reveled in her identity crisis and created a seductive, schizophrenic stage composite of her heroes is resonant but rehashed rock lore; Bockris, however, is the first to write empathetically and three-dimensionally of her controversial marriage to the late Fred "Sonic" Smith. A supposed chauvinist and alcoholic, Nick Johnstone's *Patti Smith: A Biography* (Omnibus, 1997) is too rhapsodic to be true and lacks Bockris's inside sources. Bockris's book is essential for its insight into a remarkable life and New York's rock and literary traditions.

-AHeather McCormack, *"Library Journal"*

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